***Switching Roles*: An excerpt from a senior comp**

**by Alicia Smith**

Her heart pounded as she walked across stage left to center. Bright lights shined on her pale, freckled face as she cleared her throat, preparing to recite the lines she practiced late last night. She stood erect at five foot six inches tall, loosening her shoulders and taking a deep breath. She was nervous. Jessica had never attempted to act before, but she loved Juliet, and felt something was calling her to audition. She closed her blue eyes in mental preparation. When she opened them again she was Juliet, reciting the words spoken in despair at the balcony.

“’Tis but thy name that is my enemy; Thou art thyself, though not a Montague. What’s Montague? It is nor hand nor foot, nor arm nor face, nor any other part belonging to a man,” she said, annunciating the words the best she could.

She tried to communicate distress as she said the words. She felt connected to Juliet somehow, and tried to convey this connection through her audition. She recited the monologue the best she could. She felt the warmth from the lights on the stage. Her hands were clammy. Nervously, she completed the rest of the scene. She paused, waiting to see if she could be finished. She tried to look out at the director who was sitting a few rows away from the stage in the auditorium, but the lights were too bright. Finally, she heard the director speak.

“That will do,” the woman said. “Thank you for your audition. If you get a part it will be posted on the cast list.” She paused for a moment. Then she shouted, “Next!”

Jessica gave a tiny bow, tipping her thin frame forward slightly, and left the stage. Her heart was still racing as she walked backstage, and she was glad the audition was over. She exhaled deeply as she walked toward the thick curtains that led to the backstage area. She was lost deep in thought.

*I wonder how that went. I’ll bet I don’t get the part. There are lots of other girls who are bound to be better actors. I mean, I’ve never acted before. I won’t get the part. But what if I did well? Maybe then I could get the part. Though, I don’t think that will happen. I stumbled on some of the words and I didn’t speak clearly enough.*

With her mind elsewhere, she failed to look where she was going and stumbled on a loose extension cord coiled near the curtain. She felt her small feet slide underneath her as she lost her balance and tumbled forward. She put her arms out in a desperate attempt to save herself and felt strong hands tightly grasp her shoulders. The hands that appeared from nowhere pulled her up and helped her regain her balance. She turned to see who it was that caught her. A tall boy, about six foot two, stood towering over her. He was fairly handsome, with chocolate brown hair and coffee colored eyes.. A look of concern stretched across his narrow face.

“Are you all right?” he asked softly, genuinely.

“Yes. Yes. I’m fine. Thanks to you, I mean,” she said loudly, completely forgetting the fact that she was still backstage.

She looked at his slanting nose and high cheekbones. As she studied his face, it dawned on her that she had never introduced herself.

“I’m Jessica, by the way,” she told him.

He nodded and placed one of his long, thin fingers to his peach lips. Her eyes grew big as she began to understand. Auditions were still taking place and she didn’t want to be any more of a distraction. With a quick wave, she turned to leave, embarrassed that she could have forgotten where she was.

As she stepped away from him, she felt his hand graze her shoulder in a gentle tap. She turned again and saw him motioning toward his cell phone. He began rapidly typing something. She waited a moment for him to finish and he handed her the phone.

On the screen, he had written her a short message: “I’m Aaron. I’m about to audition now, so I can’t talk. Meet me outside the auditorium when I’m done?”

She nodded and passed back the phone. With a quick smile, she walked to the doorway. She turned back to look at him once more before leaving. He was thin but built. His biceps bulged slightly underneath his black t-shirt, and she could tell by his grip on her shoulders that he was strong. He rested his lean frame against the wall as he waited calmly for his turn to audition.

*He seems nice*, Jessica thought as she turned and pushed open the heavy wooden doors that kept the noise out of backstage.

She waited outside for a while, sitting on the ground picking at her fingernails—a nervous habit. She was full of nervous habits. Her mother always told her that she tried to do too much, that she spent too much time trying to be perfect and not enough time taking care of herself. Jessica closed her eyes, exhausted. After a late night working on the school newspaper, she only had a minimal amount of time to do her extensive homework. After she finished the work for her Advanced Placement classes, she stayed up even later to practice her lines for her audition. By 6:45 a.m., Jessica was awake again and off to school for band practice.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten dinner yet. Glancing at the silver watch that graced her wrist, she saw that it was nearly seven. She had already been awake for over twelve hours and still had to work on homework, practice her flute, and make posters for Student Council’s dodgeball tournament the next day. She slumped her head against one of the red metal lockers.

*Come on,* she thought. *I need to go home so I can get my work done and sleep a little!*

After waiting a few more minutes she got up, convinced that he had forgotten about her. Slinging her hot pink messenger bag across her shoulders, she prepared to head home. She fished for her car keys in the right pocket of her designer jeans, walked to Door 34 and pushed it open, heading out to the parking lot where her plum-colored 1991 Honda Accord was parked. As she left the building, she breathed in the cool September air. The sun was setting; its remnants peaked over the top of the red brick building. She glanced across the parking lot, trying to remember where she parked. With only a few other cars left at that hour, she didn’t have trouble picking out hers after a quick survey. She started toward it, quickening her pace as she thought of going home and getting some dinner. Her stomach was growling constantly now, and all she could think about was eating something her mom had lovingly prepared for her.

As she approached the Honda and bent in to unlock the door, she heard someone calling her name. She turned to look around the parking lot to see who was trying to get her attention. She saw Aaron jogging toward her car. She opened the door, threw her messenger bag inside, and closed it again. She leaned up against the car to wait until Aaron reached her.

“Hey,” she shouted. She saw him wave in his aloof manner, a quick, sharp gesture that more resembled him attempting to karate chop the air. He continued jogging until reached the car, panting.

“You didn’t wait for me,” he accused, looking slightly put out by her inconsiderate behavior.

“I thought you’d forgotten about me,” she said, a grin spreading across her tired face.

“I had a long audition since I’m one of the only guys trying out,” he told her, an explanation she hadn’t even considered.

“Oh. I didn’t realize…”

He cut her off, “No problem.”

They stood there for a moment in silence.

“So, uh, why did you want me to wait on you?” Jessica asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Aaron said shaking his head, “I just wanted to properly introduce myself. I haven’t seen you around the theatre circuit, so I figured you must be new to the stage. I’m Aaron. Aaron Skinner.”

“Jessica Schultz,” she said, shaking his hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jessica. Is this your first play?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jessica said. “I’ve never auditioned before.”

“Well, I’ve done lots of plays so if you need any help, feel free to ask,” Aaron said, smiling.

“Thanks,” Jessica said. “I do have one question, though.”

“Yeah?”

“When will the cast list be posted?” she asked, eager to find out how her audition went.

“Oh, usually Ms. Reddington takes about a week to make decisions. It should be up Monday morning. She’s generally really prompt, so it’s up a few minutes before classes start,” he said.

“Thanks,” Jessica replied.

She waited for him to say something else. When he didn’t, she broke the silence again.

“So, um, I think I’ll get going. See you on Monday when the cast list gets posted?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m sure I’ll see you then,” Aaron said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, you too,” Jessica said awkwardly.

She offered a quick wave, and then slid her body into the driver’s seat and put the keys in the ignition. Shutting the door tightly, she buckled her seatbelt and prepared to make the three-minute drive from Lee High School to her two-story, ranch-style house at the north end of town. She put the car to reverse and began to back up slowly, her foot only allowing a slight pressure on the gas pedal before switching into drive and heading home.

She pulled into the driveway a few minutes later, put the Honda in park and twisted the key out of the ignition. Grabbing the messenger bag off of the passenger seat, she pushed her tired body out of the car, slammed the door shut and went inside. The smell of homemade rolls, chicken, and noodles wafted through the house. Her mom and dad were sitting at the table with her sisters eating dinner.

“Hey Jess,” her sister Samantha said as she stepped into the dining room.

“Hey Sam,” she replied as she sat down at the table and greedily loaded her plate full of food. “Smells good, Mom! I’m starving.”

“What took you so long to come home tonight, Jessica?” her mother asked her, eying the clock. “It’s past seven. I thought you didn’t have the newspaper tonight. And isn’t band only until four?”

Jessica looked down at her plate. Her mother knew something was up. After becoming involved in a variety of different activities throughout the last three years of high school, Jessica’s mother finally placed a cap on what she would allow Jessica to do. Her mother worried that she wasn’t getting enough sleep, and that her lack of free time would have negative consequences. She had strictly forbidden Jessica to audition for the school play because it would take up so much of her already thinly stretched time.

“Jessica.” Her mother’s sharp voice cut through the tense air like a knife.

Jessica knew she would have to tell her mother eventually, but she hadn’t prepared to explain the situation to her at dinner that night.

“Well, I, um, sort of, maybe, tried out for the play,” she rushed on. “I know you said that I wasn’t allowed to, but it’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Mom. That’s like, my favorite play in the whole wide world. You know it is. And I promise you I can handle it. I promise. I did this last year, and I can do it again this year. I swear, I’ll be fine,” she attempted to assure her mother.

“Jessica, we talked about this,” her mother said. She ran her hands over her face in frustration and pulled her fingers through her long, blonde hair. “You cannot do the play. It’s too much. You’re at school for twelve solid hours a day. You don’t get enough sleep because then when you get home you barely have enough time to eat, do your homework and shower. You’re pushing yourself too hard, and eventually you’re not going to be able to handle it. Enough is enough. You have to learn where to draw the line, and this play is the line.”

Her mother’s thin face was creased from frowning, and Jessica glanced at her father with a pleading look. He scratched his head and looked from daughter to wife.

Then he pushed his chair back from the table and stood up, grabbing his plate between his strong, weathered hands.

“I’m sorry ladies,” he said, shaking his head slowly, “but I’m not getting involved. You two work things out. I can’t help you.”

Jessica watched her father retreat from the dining room into his lair to watch the Sci-Fi network.

*Coward*, she thought as he left.

Her sisters, Samantha and Clara, ages eleven and nine respectively, took the hint as well and strategically removed themselves from the dining room. Jessica stared across the table at her mother, who stared back at her.

“Mom, I just want to…”

“Absolutely not. We talked about this. You are going to go in tomorrow, and you are going to tell the director that you’re not going to be able to participate in the play after all, and that you’re sorry you wasted her time. You’re not doing this play. It’s too much.”

“Mom, I can do the play. I can handle it. I’ve been doing this much work for years and I’ve been just fine. And besides, this is good preparation for college. And you said yourself I needed scholarships in order to go. How do you expect me to get scholarships if I’m not well rounded? It’s my senior year, Mom, and it’s *Romeo and Juliet*. My favorite play. Ever. In the whole world. Please?. Just this once can I please bend the rules? I promise I won’t take on anything else. I swear. Please?”

Her mother sighed. “Jessica, we’ve had this discussion a million times. First you told me you wouldn’t do more than Student Council and band because of your intensive schedule. You have five AP classes. That’s a lot of work, honey. Then you decided to become Editor-in-Chief of the school newspaper, and I allowed it. And then National Honors Society, and then youth group, and then there are your dance classes. And now the play. I’ve been lenient, Jessica. But this is too much.”

“Come on, Mom. Please? I just want to do the play. My grades are really good, and I’ve never had a chance to act before. I may not even get the part. What does it hurt to just let me do this one more thing?” she asked in desperation. “I mean, yeah, I may not sleep a lot, but I’m managing just fine. Please? It could be worse. I could be in jail. I could be spending my afternoons robbing banks and murdering people and dealing drugs. You should be *thankful* that I’m so over-involved in school. You should be *grateful* that I am not out on the streets being a hooker in my spare time. In fact, you should probably thank me for the wonderful example I set for Sam and Clara. The play isn’t a bad thing. Please, just let me do it?”

Her mom leaned her head back against the wooden chair. She shut her eyes, deep in contemplation. Sighing, she opened them and studied Jessica closely. After a few minutes of silence, her mother responded.

“Fine. But this is it. And I mean it, Jessica.”

Jessica leapt from her chair and hugged her mother tightly.

“Thank you, thank you, *thank you!*” Jessica shouted. She jumped up and down with excitement. Her mother shook her head and rose from the table, clearing the dishes and leftover food.

Jessica couldn’t believe her mother had agreed to let her be in the play. She sat back down at the table to finish her dinner. Now that she had gotten her mother’s approval, she only had to wait to find out if she had gotten the part. She quickly ate the rest of her dinner, thinking about all of the things she had to do the next day.

After finishing up, she grabbed her dishes and hauled them into the kitchen. Whistling while she cleaned up, she happily thought about when the cast list would be posted next week. She desperately hoped that her name would be on the list for the part of Juliet. She finished rinsing off the dishes, and settled in on the living room floor to start her homework. She worked quickly, hoping to finish before midnight. At 11:39 p.m., she finally completed the work that was due the next day. After packing up her messenger bag and selecting what to wear, she hopped in the shower and prepared for bed. As she pulled the covers back, she wondered how she was ever going to be able to wait for Monday to roll around.

*I hope I get the part,* she thought as she drifted off to sleep.